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Letter from John Muir to [James Whitehead], 1913 Feb 13.

John Muir

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[Original in possession of Mr. James Whitehead, Emporia, Kas.]

Martinez, California,
February 13, 1913.

Mr. James Whitehead,
Hot Springs, Ark.

Dear friend:

Your painful letter came to me in my lonely library writing den while hard at work on an Alaska book which should have been written a score of years ago. Seldom, if ever, have I received a letter that has given me so much mingled pleasure and pain — pleasure in hearing from a friend of my boyhood, and learning from you, the best and final authority, that the reports on the use of the Solomon[^] rod in your father's household, gleaned half a century ago from neighbors, including my sisters, brothers, and brothers-in-law, were, to say the least, grossly exaggerated; and pain from having been led to write by my life-long hatred of cruelty that which has given you pain.

I never did intentional injustice to any human being or animal, and I have directed my publishers to cancel all that has so grievously hurt you. For a full understanding of the matter I wish to inform you that the four articles that have appeared in the Nov[ember], Dec[ember], Jan[uary] and Feb[ruary] numbers of the Atlantic were taken from the (Ms.) of a book entitled, "My Boyhood and Youth," being the first volume of my autobiography, soon to be published. I corrected the last of the galley proofs several weeks ago and wrote the publishers that they need not send me the page proofs since their proof-readers were so careful and able. Therefore, I have not seen any of them, and am unable to tell how far the work has progressed. Possibly part or all of this first volume may be stereotyped, or even printed. If not printed, the unfortunate page will be cut out of the plate at whatever cost. And at the worst, only a comparatively small first edition may have been printed, and the part that has caused so much trouble will not appear in the ten or twenty following editions.

I have good reason, as doubtless you know, to hate the habit of child-beating, having seen and felt its effects in some of their worst forms in my father's house; and all my life I have spoken against the habit in season and out of season. But you make a great mistake in taking what I have written as a judgment or history of your father's character, as I hope to show in another volume. You doubtless know that character is made up of many particulars, and that it is grossly unfair to try the whole general character of any man by one particular, however striking and influential it may be. I was far from doing so in sketching the evil of child-beating from which we both have so bitterly suffered.

When the rod is falling on the flesh of a child and, what may oftentimes be worse, heart-breaking scolding falling on its tender little heart, it makes the whole family seem far from the Kingdom of Heaven. In all the world I know of nothing more pathetic and deplorable than a broken-hearted child, sobbing itself to sleep after being unjustly punished by a truly pious and conscientious misguided parent. Compare this Solomon[^] treatment with Christ's. King Solomon has much to answer for in this particular, though I suppose he may in some measure be excused by the trying, irritating size of his family.

Your father, like my own, was, I devoutly believe, a sincere Christian, abounding in noble qualities, preaching the Gospel without money or price while working hard for a living, clearing land, blacksmithing, able for anything, and from youth to death never abating one jot his glorious foundational religious enthusiasm. I revere his memory with that of my father and the New England Puritans, — types of the best American pioneers whose unwavering faith in God's eternal righteousness forms the basis of our country's greatness.

Come and see me, and let us become better acquainted after all these eventful years. [I hear of you occasionally through my brothers and always

with high esteem and honor, which has made my heart glad. David and Sarah are living in Pacific Grove, California; Mary and Daniel, as I suppose you know, in Nebraska; Joanna is in Richmond, Virginia, and Margaret and Anna have gone to the land of the dead. My wife died long years ago, and both my daughters (all the children I ever had) are married and have homes of their own and happy families; while I am left alone in a large house with only books and hard literary work for companions.

Write again and tell me of your own life, and of Benjamin and your sister. You must now be nearing three score and ten. I will be seventy-five in a few months, and in the sundown of life we turn fondly back to the friends of the Auld-lang-syne. So I am now doing, and am wishing that you may be assured that I am,

Faithfully your friend,

John Muir.